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RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHROV #0161/01 3111016
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 071016Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0832
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0132
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES 0001
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 0001
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 0056
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 0064
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0864

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000161

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DEPT. FOR EUR/WE; ROME FOR POL; NAPLES FOR CG

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [EC](#) [IS](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS GATHER TO ADVANCE WORLD
PEACE

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This is a combined Embassy Vatican/ US Consulate General Naples
cable

Summary

11. (U) Religious and political leaders from around the world convened in Naples under the auspices of a Catholic non-governmental organization for three days of dialogue and debate on a broad range of issues under the overall theme of "A World without Violence". Among the participants were heads of state, Italy's minister of foreign affairs, and Israel's minister of interior. Panelists on a discussion on Israel and Palestine called for negotiations on final status issues for the upcoming Annapolis conference. Muslim scholars underlined that Islam is a religion of peace and criticized USG policies in the Middle East. Various speakers welcome the selection of Naples, a city with many social problems including violence, as the host for this year's gathering.

Discussions draw crowds

12. (U) The conference, which took place from October 21 to the 23, was organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, an association founded in Rome in 1968 dedicated to evangelization and charity in Italy and in more than seventy countries around the world (Note: Sant'Egidio website, www.santegidio.org, describes the organization as a movement of lay people with more than 50,000 members. End note). Pope Benedict XVI's October 21 Mass for 20,000 people in Naples served as a high-profile prelude to the conference -- Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and the presidents of Ecuador and Tanzania later participated in the Conference's first plenary session.

13. (U) During his homily, the Pope called on authorities to build more schools and create more jobs in Naples to combat the "disgraceful" Camorra. The Pope also condemned religiously-inspired violence, stating that "in a world wounded by conflicts, where violence is justified in God's name, it's important to repeat that religion can never become a vehicle of hatred, it can never be used in God's name to justify violence."

14. (U) At the opening ceremony of the inter-faith dialogue -- an event first organized by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986 -- most of the speakers focused on the contribution that world religions can make to world peace. Some dissonant notes were sounded by the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yona Metzger, who called on the religious leaders to publicly and specifically condemn the Iranian President for his statements regarding Israel; and Dr. Ezzeddin Ibrahim, founder of the United Arab Emirates University, who referred to the US presence in Iraq as an occupation resulting from a war "based on false pretenses" and who criticized Metzger for singling out Iran.

15. (U) The inauguration was followed by three days of meetings. Different sessions (32 in all) tackled such issues as AIDS, immigration, Latin America, and the plight of Africa. Some of the sessions had overflow crowds, with organizers running out of headphones for interpreting.

Panel discussion on the Arab-Israeli conflict

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16. (U) In a panel discussion under the banner "Israel - Palestine: a long struggle for peace," Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema underlined the need to achieve tangible outcomes, such an agreement or a "preface to an agreement" at the November Arab-Israeli Conference in Annapolis. D'Alema also suggested that NATO could play a useful role in bringing peace to the Middle East through a partnership with Israel and the Arab countries similar to the "Partnership for Peace" agreements that NATO has negotiated with former Soviet republics.

7 (U) Israeli Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit said he was in favor of discussing final status issues (Jerusalem, refugees and borders) in Annapolis. He stated that the Roadmap had failed, and that there was a need for a new approach. He added that there should also be direct negotiations between Palestinian and Israelis in Jerusalem and in Ramallah itself, criticizing what he viewed as an overdependence on the international community to solve the region's problems. The Palestinian representative, Jamal Zakout, urged support for the Saudi peace initiative, stating that twenty-two moderate Arab countries were for the first time ready to support a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine.

Ecuadorian President Condemns Violence of Economic Injustice

18. (U) In a panel discussion entitled "Latin America: a Future without Violence", Ecuadorian President Delgado pointed to

economic injustice as the root cause of violence in Latin America. Delgado complained that "our peoples" are forced to be illegal immigrants because of the political and economic injustices created in the 80s and 90s by "Washington's policies". He continued by charging that neo-liberal economics "has failed Latin America, and now I and other leaders in Latin America must undertake massive social transformations to rectify matters". Delgado also criticized "commercial globalization", adding that "there are no illegal people, just illegal profits".

Final statement condemns violence in the name of religion

¶9. (U) The official statement adopted by participants at the end of the conference condemned violence as "an illness that pollutes everything." The statement affirmed that "anyone who uses the name of God to hate the other, to practice violence, or to wage war, is cursing the name of God."

Comment

¶10. (U) The International Prayer for Peace, now in its 21st year, has become an institution, and one which attracts a large number of prominent government and religious leaders from around the world. Its panel discussions are interesting and sometimes provocative, but the event's significance lies rather in (a) its symbolic importance, and (b) its ability to serve as a networking site for odd bedfellows, i.e. key political and religious leaders who might otherwise find it difficult to meet.

In this regard it resembles Washington's annual National Prayer Breakfast. In the past, the Community of Sant'Egidio has been able to develop these initial contacts into specific initiatives in areas such as retroviral programs for AIDS victims, birth registrations for children in poor African countries, and even concrete and lasting peace agreements, like in Mozambique in 1992.

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¶11. (SBU) Embassy Vatican regularly attends the Prayer for Peace, and this year Consulate General Naples also attended. In spring 2006, when the event was held at Georgetown University in Washington, Under Secretary Karen Hughes spoke at the event. However, the USG is missing an opportunity by not participating at a high level on a more regular basis. The next Prayer for Peace will be held in September 2008 in Cyprus, a location with evident potential for interfaith and political dialogue. Post recommends that Department consider possible attendance at that time by a senior USG representative, perhaps at Cabinet level. Post would be delighted to work with Department and Embassy Nicosia to facilitate such participation.

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